SLOVENSKÁ ARCHEOLÓGIA LXXIII–1, 2025, 121–135
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/slovarch.2025.73.5

A GAMEBOARD FROM GERULATA (BRATISLAVA-RUSOVCE) IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMAN-PERIOD GAMING FINDS IN THE NORTH OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN[1]

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This article examines a Roman period gameboard (Gameboard 1) from Gerulata (modern Bratislava-Rusovce, Slovakia), a military settlement on the Danube frontier in Pannonia. The board was carved into a tile and features a 7 × 8 grid layout. A much smaller fragment of another possible gameboard or fragment of wall tile (Possible gameboard/tile 2) was also recovered from the site, though this identification is less secure. This study explores the archaeological context, typology, and potential identification of the board(s). Gameboard 1 was probably used for playing the game known as *ludus latrunculorum*, even if other possibilities should not be entirely discarded. Analysis of published and unpublished finds from the Northern Carpathian basin and neighbouring regions – which we present together for the first time – indicates that this gameboard belongs to a wider ludic culture, which was particularly visible among Roman soldiers and military communities. Portable elements of Roman-style material culture (dice, counters) but not bulky gameboards have been recovered in parts of Slovakia that were in the *Barbaricum*, and this suggests some cultural diffusion across borders in the Roman period. These objects appear to be prestige finds, since they are commonly associated with elite sites, but we cannot be sure that they were used to play 'Roman' games. The article argues that such objects offer a valuable lens into the social and cultural life of Roman soldiers and civilians on the frontier. It also highlights the methodological challenges of identifying and interpreting gameboards in provincial contexts.

Keywords: West Slovakia, Bratislava-Rusovce, Gerulata, Roman period, board games, *tegulae*.

INTRODUCTION

Board games have not received much attention in Slovak archaeology. Moreover, there has been limited study of game-boards in the archaeology of Central Europe more broadly, and relatively few gameboards of Roman date have been published from the region. However, the discovery of a wooden gameboard in a rich grave at Poprad (*Lau/Pieta 2014*, 360, 361; *Lau/Pieta/Štolcová 2022*; *Schädler/Hall 2024*, 162), outside Roman territory, shows that the interaction between the Roman Empire and *Barbaricum* was not necessarily limited to warfare or trade: cross border cultural interactions may also have included games.

Recent scholarship in other parts of the Roman world has emphasised the importance of publishing gaming-related finds in their archaeological and social contexts. Moreover, gaming kit found in the *Barbaricum*, outside of Roman territory, has long been recognised as a valuable source for understanding social life across borders in antiquity (e.g., *Krüger 1982*; *Schädler/Hall 2024* and further bibliography cited below). However, we still understand very little of the gaming culture of the Romans and their neighbours in the territory today occupied by Slovakia as few gaming-related objects from the region have been published or analysed in detail, and indeed few other gameboards have been published from the rest of the Roman province of Pannonia to which Southwest Slovakia partly belonged in antiquity.

This contribution seeks to meet this gap through an exploration of a gameboard from Roman-held territory in Slovakia. This gameboard scratched onto a tile, which was found during a rescue excavation at the Roman military camp at Gerulata (modern Rusovce; Fig. 1) – a second tile found during the same excavation also bears an incised grid,

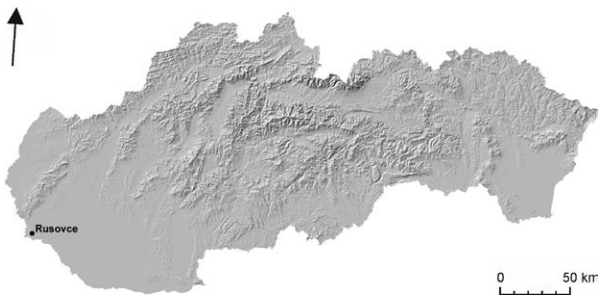

Fig. 1. Bratislava-Rusovce (Gerulata), Maďarská street, the territory of Slovakia. Location of the find of the gameboard.

[1] This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA22145 – Computational Techniques for Tabletop Games Heritage (GameTable) which is supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology; www.cost.eu). The work was found by grant projects VEGA 2/0043/22 and 2/0191/25. The authors would like to thank Summer Courts for reading a draft of this paper and Linda Dobosi for generously sharing information about finds from Hungary ahead of publication.

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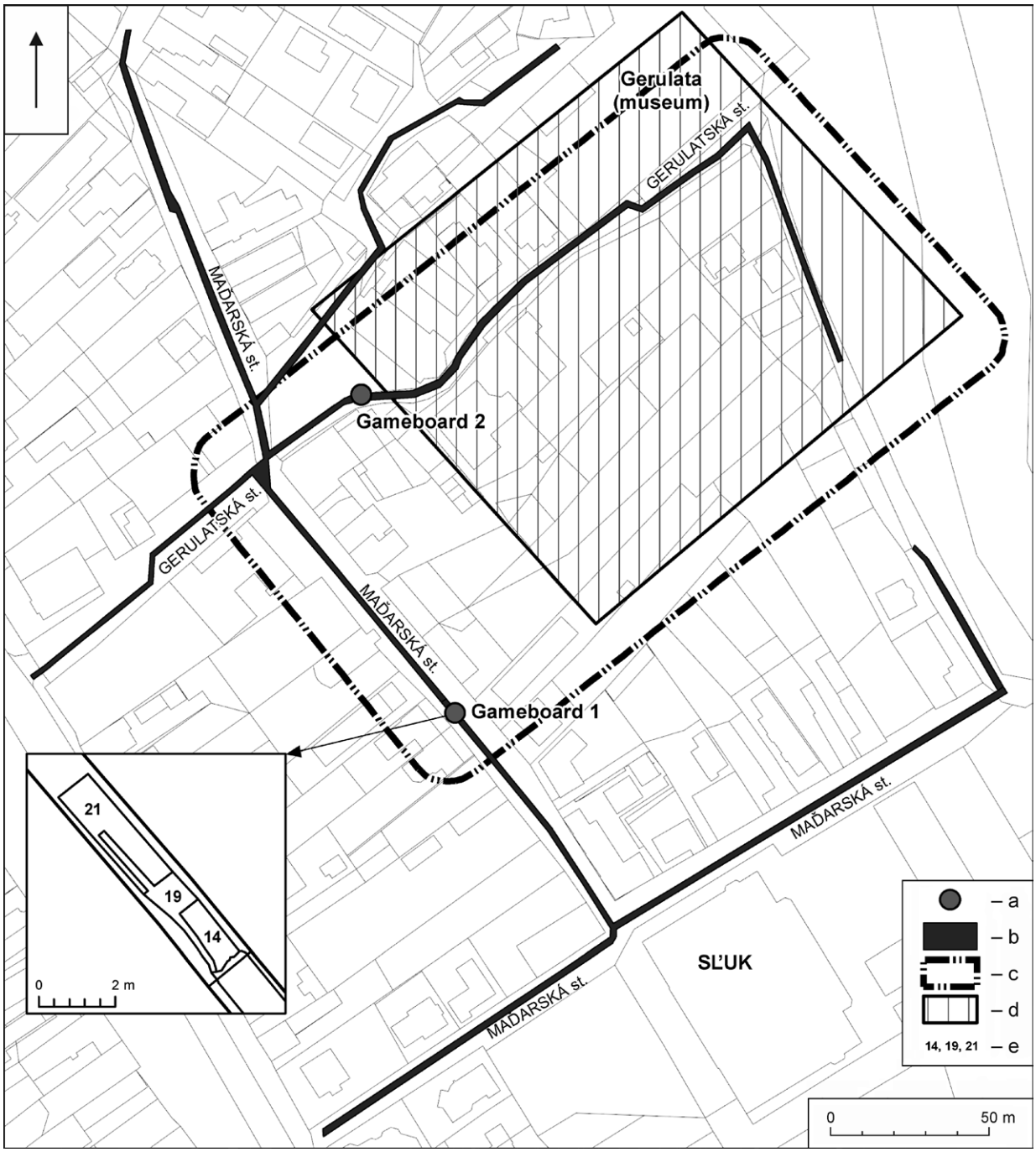

Fig. 2. Plan of the construction/excavation and location of gameboards finds. Legend: a – gameboard; b – trench; c – first construction stage of the castellum (1st–2nd c. AD); d – third construction stage of the castellum (end of the 3rd–4th c. AD); e – feature number. Graphics B. Šebesta.

though it is likely that in this instance, the deeper incisions, which bear traces of mortar, relate to the tile's use in building. We begin by introducing the site and summarising the broader setting in which the gameboard(s) were recovered. We then present the gameboard(s) and their specific find contexts in detail, situate these objects in the wider context of published gaming-related finds in Slovakia and in neighbouring countries, much of which we draw together for the first time, and discuss the game which may have been played on them. This is likely to have been *ludus latrunculorum*,[2] although other

[2] Basic information about this game can be found in *Schädler 1994*; *2001* or online in W. Crist's useful summary available at https://ludii.games/details.php?keyword=Ludus%20Latrunculorum [28. 9. 2025]

possibilities also need to be considered. We then close by examining the role of games in military communities and in the wider context of the archaeology of Roman Pannonia. Throughout, we hope to demonstrate the value of studying game-related finds in the wider context of contemporary research on games studies and encourage colleagues in Slovakia and neighbouring countries to invest time in studying and publishing these materials.

THE DISCOVERY AND FIND CONTEXT

Archaeological investigations were carried out between 2014 and 2016 during sewer system construction and water pipeline reconstruction in the Bratislava district of Rusovce (Gerulatská, Irkutská, and Maďarská streets; *Šebesta et al. 2017*; *Žák Matyasowszky et al. 2015*). In 2014, two potential finds associated with board games were uncovered (Fig. 2). During these excavations, a large number of archaeological features were identified, although not all could be fully investigated due to the scale of the works and the constraints of ongoing construction. Among the features uncovered were ditches, masonry structures, floor surfaces, and various settlement-related remains, as well as graves dating to the Roman later periods. Almost all of the excavated features are associated with the well-known Roman site of Gerulata, a small Roman fort or *castellum* (*Šebesta et al. 2017*; *Žák Matyasowszky et al. 2015*). The fort was in use from the late 1st c. to the 4th c. AD, though most of the finds uncovered during the 2014–2016 rescue excavations belong to the 2nd and 3rd c. AD. Gerulata's immediate surroundings included a civilian settlement and numerous Roman-period cemeteries (*Schmidtová 2012*; *Varsik 2012a*). A cavalry unit, *ala I Cannanefatium*, was stationed at the site for most of its operational period. There is also evidence to suggest the short-term presence of other military units, including *cohors V Callaecorum Lucensium* and *equites sagittarii* (*Varsik 2012b*).

Find no. 1/Gameboard 1 (inventory number 92/2014)

Gameboard 1 (Fig. 3: 2) comes from Feature 21, located on Maďarská Street within the Roman-period *castellum*. Feature 21 can be interpreted as either a plaster (mortar) layer or part of a collapsed wall from a building, preserved as a thin stratum. The fill consisted of white or light pink mortar mixed with small, fine stones. A floor surface was identified nearby, although the context was disturbed by a later trough. Both the floor and the trough date to the Roman period. Unfortunately, as the excavation was confined to a 1-m-wide service trench and conducted under rescue conditions, it was not possible to undertake broader or more detailed investigation of the context.

Gameboard 1 was previously published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Romans and Slovakia* (*Kucharík ed. 2021*, 181), but it has not been subject to detailed analysis and was presented without accompanying contextual information. The fragment is roughly trapezoidal in shape, measuring 13 × 12 × 16 × 7 cm, with a thickness ranging from 2.2 to 2.7 cm. It has been fired to an orange colour. The fabric is free of small stones or other visible inclusions. One surface was smoothed, while the opposite side bears visible plant impressions. Based on its form and composition, the object appears to be a fragment of a Roman brick or *tegula*, of the type likely produced by soldiers stationed in the region. A gameboard was shallowly incised into the smoothed surface after firing. The gameboard comprises a grid of at least 7 by 8 squares – 44 squares are partially preserved in total. A thicker incised line shown on the right-hand edge in the drawing (Fig. 3: 2) may indicate one edge of the gameboard. The irregular breaks on the other sides indicate that the gameboard would originally have been larger but it is unclear how much larger. The squares are irregular in size, with the best-preserved examples measuring between 1.5 and 2.7 cm. This is broadly consistent with the cells of a sample of grid-type gameboards which have been measured in Britain, where the individual squares ranged between ca. 2–4 cm on a side (*Courts/Penn 2021*, 2, 3, fig. 4). While it is important to be careful when using evidence from elsewhere in the Roman Empire as diagnostic tools to identify gameboards, this comparative data suggests that the design is fitting with that of a gameboard. Gameboard 1 appears to have been engraved after firing. A misdrawn line is visible approximately at the centre of the board. The shallowness of the incisions suggests that the lines were intended to be visible but did not serve a structural function, such as securing mortar. Combined with the likelihood that the lines were added after firing, this indicates that the object was originally intended as a building tile but was subsequently (re)used as the surface for a gameboard. Specially made ceramic boards with grids are known across the Roman Empire, for example at the town of Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester; e.g., *Fox/Hope/Reid 1901*, 231–233, fig. 1; pl. XXVII) and along Hadrian's Wall (England; e.g., *Gerrard/Mills 2003*, 64, fig. 2) in Britain. Further examples of gameboards from Pannonia and its neighbours are discussed further below.

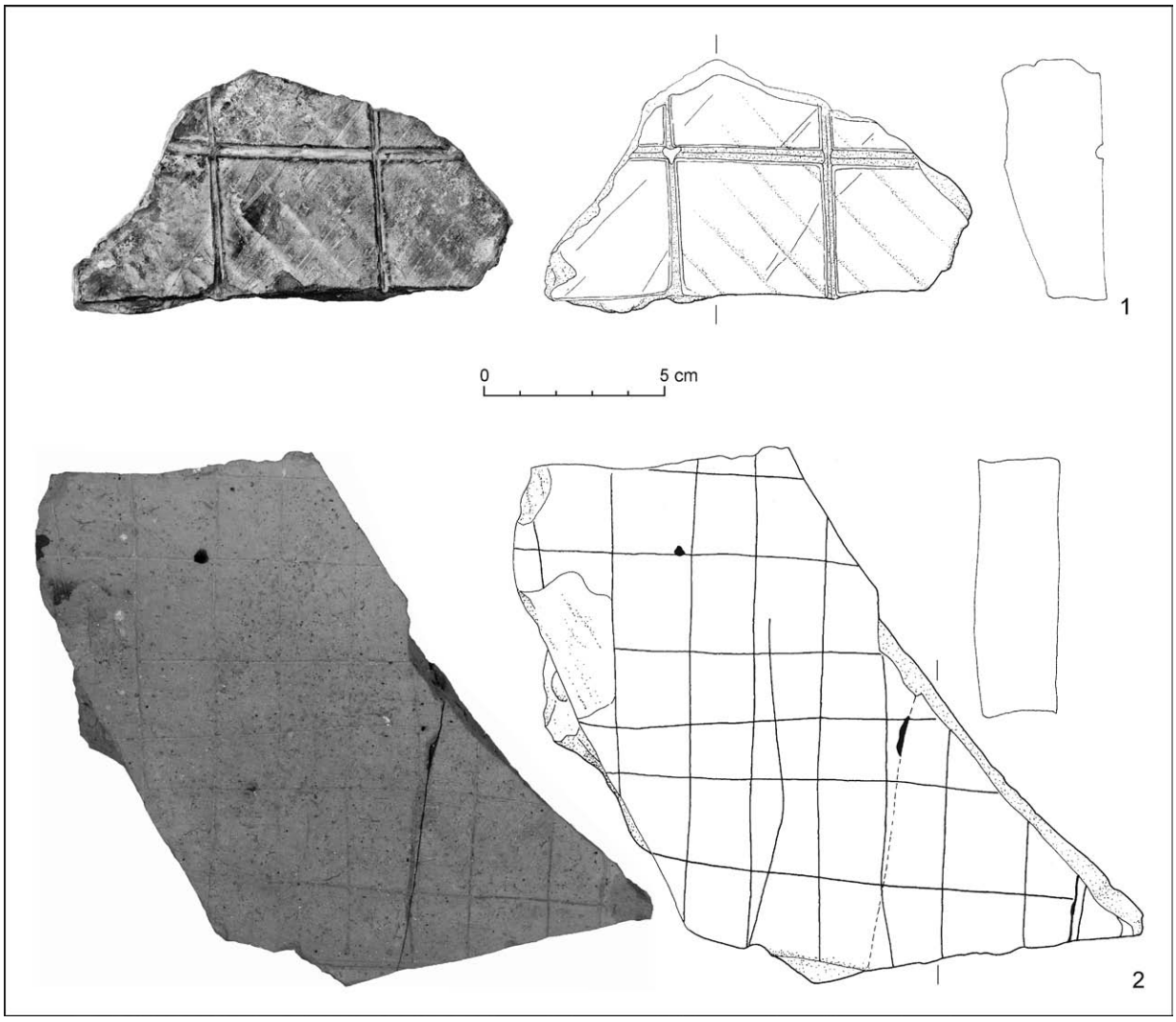

Fig. 3. Bratislava-Rusovce. Gameboards. 1 – find no. 2/possible gameboard; 2 – find no. 1/Gameboard 1. Drawing A. Balogová, photo Š. Hritz.

Find no. 2/Possible gameboard or tile 2 (inventory number 531/2016)

Possible gameboard 2 (Fig. 3: 1) was recovered within the area of the Roman *castellum* (Gerulatská Street, near the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene). However, the context of this find is unclear and lacks stratigraphic integrity, making interpretation difficult. Later disturbance cannot be ruled out.

This object is worth including in this publication because it underlines the difficulty of securely distinguishing between gameboards and tiles which were incised for other reasons. It is an elongated and irregular fragment of tile, measuring approximately 11.4 × 5.8 cm, with a thickness ranging from 2.3 to 3.2 cm. It has been fired to an orange colour. The fabric contains no small stones or visible inclusions. One surface bears a very thin (1–2 mm) grey-white layer, probably plaster, into which regular square shapes have been incised. Six squares are partially preserved, with only one complete side surviving, measuring 4.4 cm. The engravings appear to have been made prior to firing and are visibly deeper and broader than those on Gameboard 1. While a few grid-type gameboards from Britain have cells of this size, most are smaller (*Courts/Penn 2021*, 2, 3, fig. 4).

Four criteria therefore suggest that this object was more likely produced as a building tile than as a gaming board: (1) the incisions were made before firing; (2) the incisions are much deeper than on Gameboard 1; (3) they appear to be partially filled with plaster; and (4) the squares are bigger than is typical for similar gameboards from elsewhere, as discussed above. While these observations do not rule out the possibility that it was later repurposed as a gameboard, such an interpretation remains

largely hypothetical. Although we remain sceptical about the use of this piece as a gameboard, it is worth presenting here, as similar tiles have been interpreted as gameboards in other parts of the empire (see *Courts/Penn 2019*, 5, 6). Future studies of grid-type gameboards in Slovakia and beyond should therefore place special emphasis on clear identification criteria to prevent confusion between gameboards and other incised tiles.

Other finds from Gerulata

Gameboard 1 is not the only gaming-related find from Gerulata, and before we continue, we will summarise the other published finds. In burials from Gerulata's Roman Cemetery II, cubic bone dice were found in graves LXXVI (two dice) and 97 (one die).[3] The dice from grave LXXVI were placed in the hands of the buried child (*Pichlerová 1981*, 19, 76, 148, tab. XXXV: 1, 2; CXXI: 11). Roman Cemetery II is dated to the second half of the 1st c. AD through to the end of the 2nd c. AD. A bone die was also found inside the *castellum* on Kovácsova Street, in a context dated to the 2nd–3rd c. AD (*Schmidtová 2012*, 262, fig. 432). In addition to dice, round bone, mica, and bronze counters have also been recorded but are without context (*Schmidtová 2012*, 262, fig. 430). These finds underline that a range of gaming kit was available to the occupants of Gerulata, and the presence of dice in particular indicates that games of chance were played here. However, as we will see, the most likely game played on Gameboard 1 was a game of skill, rather than of chance.

DISCUSSION: THE GAME(S) PLAYED ON GRID-TYPE BOARDS

Grid-type gameboards (type SG after *Bell/Roueché 2007*; type 29 after *Pace/Penn/Courts 2024*, 363) are a well-known component of the ludic culture of the Roman Empire. A recent synthesis has shown that they are attested from Britain in the West to Egypt in the East (*Crist et al. 2024*, 67, fig. 4). In some areas, grid-type gameboards are particularly popular: they make up the vast majority of such items identified in Britain (*Courts/Penn 2019*), but they are apparently less common in Eastern Mediterranean sites like Aphrodisias (*Russell/Chaniotis/Wilson 2024*), Ephesus (*Schädler 2024*), and in Lycia and Phrygia (*Talloen 2024*), where they are either not attested or only make up a small proportion of the gameboards identified. At present, the small number of published gameboards across the whole of the Roman world means that we are not able to say whether this reflects a real pattern in the popularity of the game(s) played on grids (discussed further below) through time and/or space, or simply a publication bias, since the gameboards at many sites remain to be documented.

Previous scholarship has previously associated grid-type gameboards of various sizes with the game described in Latin literature at *ludus latrunculorum* or *ludus latrunculi* ('Game of the little soldiers' or 'of the bandits', see e.g., *Austin 1934*, 26; *Bell 1979*, 84–87; *Courts/Penn 2019*, 5–7; *2021*, 1–3; *Murray 1952*, 33, 34; *Parlett 1999*, 234–238; *Purcell 1995*, 5; *Richmond 1994*; *Schädler 1994*; *2001*). *Ludus latrunculorum* is discussed explicitly or implicitly by many textual sources, particularly in Latin. It is first mentioned by name by the 1st c. BC author *M. T. Varro, Ling.* 10.22 and continues to be discussed by learned sources as late as the 7th c. AD (Isidore; *Origins* 18.67). It may be a descendent of an earlier Greek game known as *Polis* (for a critical review with earlier bibliography see *Nelson 2020*, 24–26). The game has been studied in detail by *U. Schädler* (*1994*; *2001*), and key features have more recently been summarised by *W. Crist et al. 2024*. Our characterisation of the game in the following paragraphs is heavily reliant on these earlier syntheses. Four key aspects of the game can be inferred from surviving texts:

A rectilinear board. Varro, in his discussion of Latin grammar in the 1st c. BC, compares a declension table composed of horizontal and vertical lines to the board used for *ludus latrunculorum* (*Varro, Ling.* 10.22). This implies that the game was played on a square or rectangular grid, though the precise dimensions remain unspecified. *U. Schädler* (*2007*, 361) has suggested that a declension table would typically consist of six rows – corresponding to the Latin cases – and six columns for the singular and plural forms across the masculine, feminine, and neuter genders.

Placement phase. Two sources indicate that the board was empty at the start of play. In the *Laus Pisonis* (190–208), an anonymous poem praising a man who belonged to the *gens* Piso, the game is invoked with martial symbolism (*Richmond 1994*), explicitly noting that the pieces are 'more cunningly placed'[4] on an open board. Isidore of Seville (*Isidore. Etym.* 18.67) writing in the early 7th c. AD, refers to

[3] At the site, the inhumation graves were numbered with Roman numerals, and the cremation graves were numbered with Arabic numerals.

[4] *'callidiore modo'*; *Laus Pis.* 192; translated by authors.

three types of pieces – or perhaps, three modes of movement: *ordine* (moving in regular fashion), *vagi* (moving freely), and *inciti* (immobile).

Orthogonal movement. Ovid (*Ov. Tr.* 2.477), states that the pieces move in straight lines.

Custodial capture. Ovid's Tristia (*Ov. Tr.* 2.477) also implies that a piece trapped between two enemies is captured, an unusual mechanism known in modern literature as 'custodial capture'. The same concept appears in the Ars Amatoria (*Ov. Ars am.* 3.358), where Ovid writes that *'when one-piece falls before a double'*[5] and in Martial's Epigrams (*Mart. Epig.* 14.17), we read that *'On this side of me the die scores with double sixes. On this other a piece of different colour is killed by two foemen.'*[6]

Given the breadth and longevity of references to *ludus latrunculorum* in Latin literature, it is very likely that many of the grid-type boards identified in the archaeological record were used for this game. However, it remains possible that some of these boards were employed for other, currently unidentified games. The limited and fragmentary nature of the textual evidence means that we cannot determine with certainty what these alternative games were, nor reconstruct how they may have been played. Published grid boards across the Roman world vary considerably in size: *W. Crist et al.'s* (*2024*, 65–67) synthesis of well-preserved boards showed that they ranged from six-by-six squares to eleven by sixteen squares, and some fragmentary boards also had at least seventeen cells on a side. This variety in board size has led to questions about whether all such boards were suitable for playing *ludus latrunculorum*. *U. Schädler's* (*2007*) analysis of pieces laid out for a game on a lost wooden board from the mid-1st c. AD Doctor's Grave at Stanway, Colchester, England, suggests that pieces were arranged on a grid-like board, which was not used for *ludus latrunculorum* and may have instead been used for an otherwise unknown Celtic game. Moreover, recent artificial intelligence simulations by *W. Crist et al.* (*2024*) have suggested that grid-based boards with a larger number of squares would be unsuitable for *ludus latrunculorum*, as they tend to result in extremely long or even unfinishable games; *U. Schädler* and *M. A. Hall* (*2024*, 168, 169) have also made similar observations based on more traditional. archaeological-typological methods of analysis. This could indicate that other games were played on larger grid-type boards in some regions of the Roman world. Given that the total number of squares on either Gameboard 1 or Possible gameboard/tile 2 remains unknown, it cannot be ruled out that these boards were used for games other than *ludus latrunculorum*, although this remains the most likely interpretation.

It has also been suggested that grid-like boards could have been used as *abaci* (*Eckardt 2017*, 201, with further references). This interpretation may draw support from a passage of Pliny the Younger, who writes: *'I was often obliged to introduce calculations into the midst of my impassioned and lofty arguments and practically demand counters and a board for reckoning…'*[7] (*Plin. Ep.* 6.33.9). However, recent research into *abaci* in the ancient world has suggested that these took a very different form (*Dasen/Gavin 2021*). It is therefore likely that grid-layout boards were made and primarily used for the gaming, though secondary, improvised use as *abaci* cannot be excluded.

The identification of Gameboard 1 with *ludus latrunculorum* is particularly appropriate given the strong connection between this game and military communities. As we have already mentioned, the very name *ludus latrunculorum* itself refers to either 'little soldiers' or 'bandits'. Moreover, the Historia Augusta relates an incident in which the pretender Proculus (d. AD 281) was declared 'imperator' after winning ten games in a row, perhaps reflecting a connection between this game and military skill (*Hist. Aug.* 12.1–3). The popularity of this game appears to be borne out by the large number of grid-type boards which have been found in Roman military settings, particularly in Britain, Spain, and Egypt (e.g., *Courts/Penn 2019*; *Mulvin/Sidebotham 2004*, 611–603; *Pace 2022b*; *Requena/Sala 2021*). It is worth noting at this point that *ludus latrunculorum* is a game of pure skill, i.e., one distinct from chance-based games played with dice (whether that involves games using dice alone, or boardgames which used dice, such as *ludus duodecim scriptorum*, a game with analogies to modern backgammon, on which see *Schädler 1995*). Given that dice have been recovered from Gerulata, as we saw above, it is clear that members of this community played both games of skill and of chance. Roman military life was characterised by discipline but also by long periods of waiting around for things to happen – whether on duty or otherwise – and it should therefore be seen as little surprise that soldiers, or other members of military

[5] *'Unus cum gemino calculus hoste perit'*, translated by J. H. Mozley.

[6] *'Hac mihi bis seno numeratur tessera puncto; calculus hac gemino discolor hoste perit.'*, translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey.

[7] *'Intervenit [...] acribus illis et erectis frequens necessitas computandi ac paene calculos tabulamque poscendi [...]'*. Translated by B. Radice.

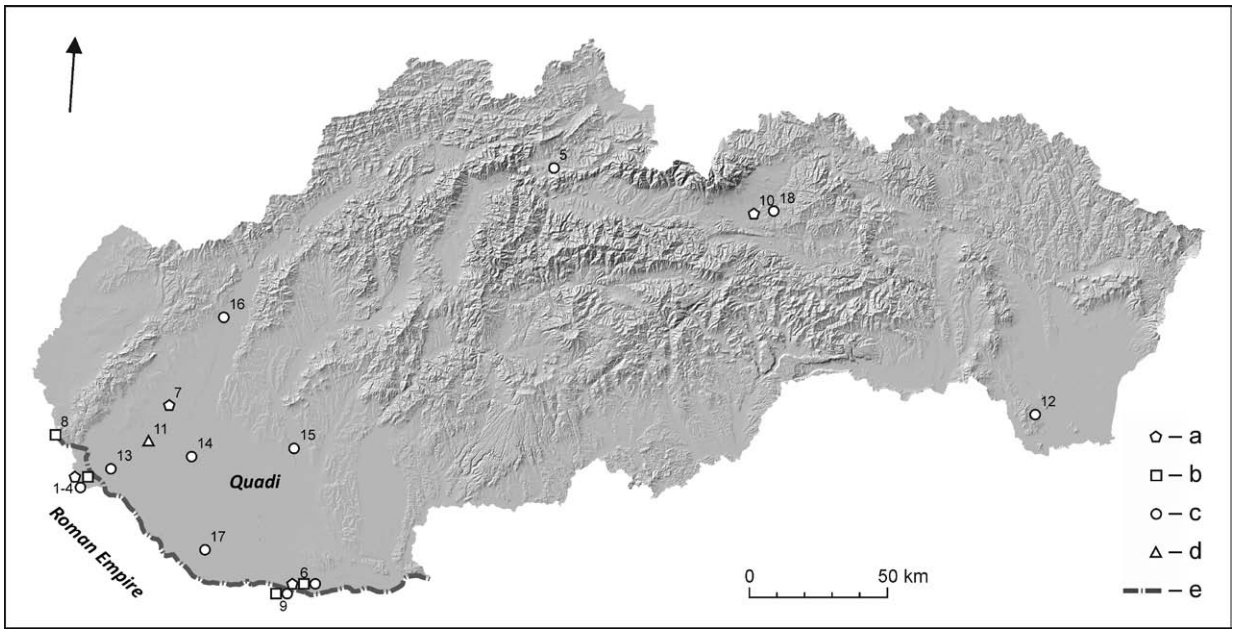

Fig. 4. Distribution of the gaming finds in Slovakia. 1 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Maďarská street; 2 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Cemetery II; 3 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Kovácsova street; 4 – Bratislava-Rusovce, without context; 5 – Vyšný Kubín; 6 – Iža-Leányvár; 7 – Cífer-Pác; 8 – Bratislava-Devín; 9 – Komárom-Brigetio; 10 – Poprad-Matejovce; 11 – Kostolná pri Dunaji; 12 – Cejkov; 13 – Dunajská Lužná; 14 – Čierny Brod; 15 – Branč; 16 – Krakovany-Stráže; 17 – Veľký Meder; 18 – Kežmarok-Vrbov. Legend: a – gameboards; b – dice; c – tokens/counters; d – others; e – frontier of the Roman Empire.

communities with whom they were associated, were keen gamers: gaming activities must have played an important role in structuring free time among Roman military communities.

THE LOCAL CONTEXT: ROMAN-PERIOD GAMING FINDS IN SLOVAKIA

Few gaming-related finds from the Roman period have been published from Slovakia, and in this section, we will provide a first survey of published material in order to meet this gap. Finds have been recovered from both Roman sites and sites inhabited by Germanic populations (Fig. 4). It is likely that Roman-period gaming material began to arrive in Slovakia before or very shortly after the Roman annexation: The earliest glass playing piece in the region was found at the Vyšný Kubín settlement, dating to the end of the La Tène period and the beginning of the Roman period (*Hrnčiarik 2013*, 165, tab. LXXXVIII: 2274). We have already seen that some gaming-related finds have been published from Gerulata. Further evidence for finds from sites within Roman territory includes:

1. Finds of one die (now lost) as well as round, conical and flat bone counters have been reported at Iža (the ancient Roman camp/fort of Kelemantia). In total, seven counters have been found in various parts of the fort and are dated roughly from the late 2nd to the 4th c. AD (*Hrnčiarik 2015*, 66, 67; *2017*, 72, 73, 130, pl. XIV: 195–201). An as-yet-unpublished gameboard, scratched on a *tegula*, also comes from the same site (*Kolón 2024*).
2. A gameboard of similar design to our Gameboard 1 was engraved on a brick or tile from the sunken-featured building 58 at the Roman-period site at Cífer-Pác – probably an productive installation (weaving weights were also found there), dating to the 4th c. AD (as Roman coins from that century were found at the site), along with fragments of Roman brick (*Varsik/Kolník 2021*, 114–119, 220, fig. 169: 4; tab. 6).
3. Three bone cubic dice and 17 round bone counters are housed in the museum in Komárno. Their precise origin is uncertain, but they most likely come from the Roman camps at Brigetio (Komárom) and/or Kelemantia (Iža-Leányvár; *Hrnčiarik 2012*, 36–38, 76–78, 92, tab. XVII).[8]
4. A die of unspecified material recovered from a Roman-period site of poorly understood function at Bratislava-Devín (*Hrnčiarik 2002*, 139).

This small collection of material – to which we hope to add in future – indicates that there

[8] The documentation for these finds is lost.

is a correlation between military communities and gaming in Roman Slovakia, with finds from a range of military bases or their surrounding settlements – Kelemantia and possibly Brigetio (nos. 1, 3). This pattern of findspots is similar to the general pattern of finding gaming material on military sites in other parts of the Roman Empire (*Courts/Penn 2019*; *Mulvin/Sidebotham 2004*; *Pace 2015*; *2020*; *2024*; *2025*, and further reference above). However, non-military settlements also feature gaming finds, as at Cífer-Pác (no. 2) and possibly Bratislava-Devín (no. 4), which reminds us that gaming was not only practised by soldiers, even if soldiers may have been particularly avid gamers. It is also worth noting that few glass counters (discussed further below) have so far been published from Roman-held territory in Slovakia, though it is likely that this is a publication bias, as no doubt much Roman material remains to be studied.

The most famous example of a gameboard from Slovakia in this era is from a princely grave at Poprad (mentioned above), located outside the Roman Empire, which can be dated to AD 375 or later based on the inclusion of a coin of Valens (*Lau/Pieta 2014*, 360, 361; *Lau/Pieta/Štolcová 2022*; *Schädler/Hall 2024*, 162). Unusually, this board was made of wood and featured a grid of approximately 15 by 17 squares. As noted above, the work of *W. Crist et al.* (*2024*) suggests that boards of this size may have been unsuitable for playing *ludus latrunculorum*, raising doubts as to whether the Poprad board reflects the same type of game being played both within and beyond the boundaries of the Roman world. The gameboard was found with six plano-convex counters, made of dark green and opaque white glass (*Pieta/Štolcová 2021*, 59). Other finds from non-Roman (barbaric) contexts include:[9]

5. A possible bone stick die from a Germanic urn grave at Kostolná pri Dunaji, dated to the 1st c. AD (*Kolník 1959*, 150).[10]
6. Eighteen (or possibly 19) probably planoconvex glass counters of various colours were also found in a rich grave at the Cejkov site, dated to the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th c. AD (*Beninger 1931*, 192, 193; *Hrnčiarik 2013*, 165; *Krekovič 1987*, 267).
7. A flat circular bone counter was recovered from a Roman-period hoard at Dunajská Lužná, which also included bone, stone, clay, and iron objects, as well as a bronze vessel. The hoard is dated by the vessel to phases B2/C1 and C1a (i.e., second half of the 2nd c. AD; *Bazovský 2010*, 23, fig. 7: 12, 15–27; *Miklíková 2010*, fig. 9).
8. A bone counter was also found in a Germanic urn grave at Čierny Brod (phases C2–D1; *Kolník 1975*, 347, fig. 7: 14), while one (or possibly two) clay counters were discovered at the settlement in Branč (*Kolník/Varsik/Vladár 2007*, 94, tab. XXXIX: 7, 8).
9. Gaming counters were also found in the elite grave II at Krakovany-Stráže. Twenty-four milk-white and 11 plano-convex black counters made of glass paste were discovered. The burial is tentatively dated to the 3rd c. AD (*Hrnčiarik 2013*, 165, tab. LXXXVIII: 1074; *Krupa/Klčo 2015*, 75, 114, fig. A-281).
10. A small stone counter was found in a Roman-period context at Veľký Meder (*Mitáš/Bobek 2021*), and a bone counter was also recovered from an urn grave (*Kolník 1975*).
11. A glass counter was found at the 4th c. settlement site of Kežmarok-Vrbov (*Giertlová/Soják 2005*, 114; *Hrnčiarik 2013*, 165, tab. LXXXVIII: 2374).

Most of these finds might be linked with play, though some caveats are necessary. Stick dice (found at Kostolná, no. 5) are common finds on pre-Roman Iron Age sites (*Kerschner 2025*), but remained in use in the early imperial period, including within the territory of Roman and some have been found inside the empire too (e.g., *Lambrugo/Bianchi 2016*, 71, fig. 2; *Mikler 1997*, 32). While interpretation of this find remains tentative, it is possible that it reflects indigenous gaming habits. Bone counters (found at Dunajská Lužná, no. 7 and Čierny Brod, no. 8) are generally assumed to be used for play but could have functioned as inlays or been used in accounting. They are often also published as spindle whorls if they have perforations. Stones (as at Veľký Meder, no. 10) are often interpreted as gaming counters though the grounds for this are often unclear (see this article, note 5). Similarly, there has been considerable debate about the use of glass counters (Cejkov, no. 6; Kežmarok-Vrbov, no. 11; Krakovany-Stráže, no. 9) for play in Roman-controlled territory, especially in the centre of the empire: a variety of methodologies for identifying the ones which would have been used for play have been put forward, including by drawing comparisons between colour and di-

[9] In our analysis, we do not include finds of river stones (pebbles) in Germanic graves because we cannot be sure they were used for games, despite the fact that they are sometimes considered to be playing stones.

[10] The original publication suggests this object – a parallelepiped, slightly bent bone shank with dot-in-circle motifs on at least two sides, both with five dots, though the object appears to be partially broken – was an awl, though similar objects elsewhere, typically with different numbers of dots on each side, are interpreted as flat dice (*Kerschner 2025*). It was not possible for the authors to inspect this item in person.

ameter of examples from securely identified sets (*Cool 2016*), and through association with dice (*Pace 2022a*). U. Schädler and M. A. Hall's survey of finds from the *Barbaricum*, which made no claim to being exhaustive and does not include the material from Slovakia, has noted that glass counters are commonly found outside the Roman Empire (*Schädler/Hall 2024*), and it is possible that some of these finds – like the ones from the Slovakian *Barbaricum* – were made in Roman territory before being exported, though this remains to be confirmed (e.g., by chemical analysis).

It is important to underline that we do not know which games these elements of the gaming kit were used for. *J. Werner* (*1973*) suggested that graves in the *Barbaricum* containing Roman-style gaming kit belonged to people who had spent part of their lives within the Empire. This may be true in some cases but not in all of them. Other possible modes of transmission include as booty taken during cross-border raiding (*Schädler/Hall 2024*, 167–169) and trade, as counters are small, cheap and easy to produce and transport, but can be visually appealing and can be used for several purposes, gaming-related and otherwise. Some of these modes of transmission – particularly violent plunder, but possibly also down-the-line exchange – would not necessarily have been compatible with playing the same games, such as *ludus duodecim scriptorum* and *ludus lantruculorum*, attested in our Roman textual sources. Therefore, the presence of Roman-style gaming kit such as boards, counters, and dice, in non-Roman contexts reflects the adoption of a shared material culture across borders, but this does not need to imply the adoption of Roman games and it is entirely possible that Germanic people used similar material culture in order to play very different games (*Schädler/Hall 2024*, 165–167).

This review of finds from non-Roman contexts in Slovakia suggests that many (but not all) gaming items were found at relatively elite sites, which underlines the prestige associated with access to Roman-style gaming materials. This is in line with broader patterns of gaming material recovered from elsewhere in the *Barbaricum* (*Schädler/Hall 2024*), though *A. Widura* (*2015*) observes that not all gaming kit from sites outside Roman territory belongs to elite contexts. It may well be then that part of the pattern we are seeing is one of visibility, i.e., that higher-status sites, and higher-status graves, are more visible to us in the archaeological record.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this section suggests that gaming items widely circulated in Roman-period Slovakia; further research aimed at identifying and analysing the social distribution of such material from Roman sites in Slovakia would be highly valuable, as it would have further potential to cast light on the social role of games in Roman Slovakia and neighbouring regions of the *Barbaricum*.

THE BROADER CONTEXT: ROMAN-PERIOD GAMING FINDS IN PANNONIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

Southwestern Slovakia, where Gerulata is located, should be understood within the broader context of the Roman province of Pannonia, to which it belonged in antiquity. It is therefore necessary to briefly consider the wider pattern of gameboard finds from elsewhere in Pannonia and the Danubian region more generally. As in Slovakia, few gameboards from this area have been published, though important and recent work by *L. Dobosi* (*2025*) in Hungary has identified grid-type boards like our Gameboard 1 at:[11]

- A site near Arrabona (Győr),
- Aquincum (a Roman military base and later city),
- Brigetio (a military base and urban centre),
- Intercisa (another military campus and associated town, now modern Dunaújváros),
- Sárvár (a road station),
- Szabadbattyán (in the baths of a 4th c. villa).

Moreover, from the 4th c. AD Roman port of Dunakeszi (again in Hungary), comes another *tegula* bearing a post-firing engraved grid, just like our Gameboard 1 (*Mráv 2011*, 47, fig. 52: 5).

Three fragmentary grid gameboards scratched onto tiles and one on stone were probably recovered in the territory of Carnuntum in Austria. These comprise:

- Tile bearing grid-type gameboard, Lower Austria State Collections Online inventory number CAR-K-3550 (which is currently on display in the exhibition in the visitor centre at Petronell-Carnuntum; *Hummer Hrsg. 2009*, 158, fig. 591);
- Tile bearing grid-type gameboard, CAR-K-3551 (*Hummer Hrsg. 2009*, 158, fig. 592),
- Tile bearing grid-type gameboard, CAR-K-1676 (*Beutler et al. Hrsg. 2017*, 354, 355, fig. 716),
- Stone slab bearing grid-type gameboard, CAR--S-1916 (currently on display in the exhibition in Museum Carnuntinum in Bad Deutsch-Altenburg).

[11] We thank Linda Dobosi for sharing information about these finds in advance of publication.

The precise findspots of these objects have not yet been identified. Moreover, as many as five further unpublished grid-type gameboards have been recovered at *Carnuntum*.[12] These latter gameboards underline the strong connection between military communities and boardgames.

Beyond Pannonia, tile boards featuring grid patterns, as well as designs for other games (such as nine men's morris), have been recorded at sites in Dacia (*Mihăilescu-Bîrliba 2016*; *Paki/Cociş 1993*), Moesia Inferior (*Nutu/Botan 2009*), and Moesia Superior (*Janković 2008–2009*). However, as *U. Schädler* and *M. A. Hall* (*2024*, 162) have noted, such gameboards do not appear to be attested beyond the boundaries of the Empire. The fuller implications of these observations will need to be unpacked in subsequent contributions, but for now it suffices to note tile boards are, as we have outlined in this article, specifically associated with military (and sometimes urban) contexts, which are more likely to have had dedicated tile-making facilities nearby. These boards were manufactured for use by people who have access to tile manufacturing technology (i.e., the tilery workers themselves) or their wider customer base. It is important to emphasise here that most tiles were made for use in building, but making a few tile gameboards might have been an attractive sideline or simply a way to pass the time. The end products would have been relatively heavy and do not appear to have travelled outside of Roman territory. Since tile manufacturing was not common outside the Roman Empire, it is unlikely that tiles on gameboards would be made locally in the *Barbaricum*, and the absence of bulky ceramic boards outside of the Empire is probably in part because such boards were heavy and impractical to transport over long distances from their point of manufacture. Tile boards may also have been unattractive exports given that grid designs were so simple to produce that they could easily be manufactured in the *Barbaricum* on other materials, possibly perishable ones like wood. Smaller, more portable elements of gaming-related material culture, such as dice and counters, could be either manufactured in Roman lands and exchanged out of the Empire or manufactured in the *Barbaricum* itself.

CONCLUSIONS

The gameboard(s) from Gerulata offer(s) a rare glimpse into the material culture of play along the Slovakian sector of the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. The layout and archaeological context of Gameboard 1 in particular support a tentative identification as a *ludus latrunculorum* board – a strategic game whose associations with martial thinking and discipline – resonate strongly in a military setting, though the identification of Possible gameboard/tile 2 must be handled with greater care as there is much potential for building tiles to be mis-identified as gameboards due to their morphological similarities. The presence of at least one gameboard at Gerulata, as well as other gaming materials such as dice and counters, underlines that gaming was part of the social fabric of this military community at the end of the Empire. This observation adds nuance to our understanding of life in a frontier fort, where leisure, training, and socialisation were often closely intertwined.

The evidence from Gerulata – and from the wider region – also highlights the potential for further work on ancient gaming in Roman Slovakia and its neighbours. While scattered parallels exist across the region, they remain underexplored in the scholarly literature. The Gerulata board encourages us to bring these materials into sharper focus – not only through typological analysis, but by considering their broader implications for the study of frontier society and regional identities. The data which we have gathered in this contribution suggest that games were widely played in Pannonia – particularly in military contexts, and this correlates well with what we know about gaming in military contexts in other parts of the Roman Empire. Moreover, the presence of portable material in elite sites outside Roman territory strongly suggests that possession and use of elements of Roman-style gaming culture held value among Rome's Germanic neighbours, though this does not mean that the games being played with this material culture were necessarily Roman-style in and of themselves. In sum, future research on the material culture of gaming of the Northern Carpathian basin area promises to enrich our understanding of both Roman games and the cultural landscape of the region.

[12] Many thanks go to Katarína Tökölyová (Römerstadt Carnuntum) for sharing information about these finds.

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Herná doska z Gerulaty (Bratislava-Rusovce) v kontexte nálezov hier z rímskeho obdobia na severe Karpatskej kotliny

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SÚHRN

Výskumu doskových hier, až na niekoľko výnimiek, sa v slovenskej archeológii nevenovala veľká pozornosť, hoci hranie hier bolo (a stále je) dôležitou ľudskou činnosťou. Nález drevenej hracej dosky v bohatom hrobe v Poprade, mimo územia Rímskej ríše, však ukazuje, že interakcia medzi Rímskou ríšou a barbarikom sa nemusela nevyhnutne obmedzovať na vojnu a obchod – cez hraničné kultúrne interakcie mohli zahŕňať aj hry.

Nedávny výskum v iných častiach rímskeho sveta zdôraznil význam publikovania nálezov súvisiacich s hrami v ich archeologickom a sociálnom kontexte. Príspevok sa snaží vyplniť medzeru v bádaní analýzou nálezov hracej a možnej hracej dosky z lokality Bratislava-Rusovce (antická Gerulata), ktoré sa našli počas záchranného archeologického výskumu, realizovaného v rokoch 2014–2016 v súvislosti s výstavbou kanalizácie a rekonštrukcie vodovodu v bratislavskej mestskej časti Rusovce (Gerulatská, Irkutská a Maďarská ulica; *Šebesta et al. 2017*; *Žák Matyasowszky et al. 2015*).

Počas výskumu sa podarilo identifikovať veľké množstvo archeologických objektov, ktoré, žiaľ, vzhľadom na rozsah prác a obmedzenia vyplývajúce z prebiehajúcej výstavby, nebolo možné v úplnosti preskúmať. Medzi odkrytými objektami boli priekopy, murované štruktúry, podlahové plochy a podobne, ako aj hroby z doby rímskej a z neskorších období. Takmer všetky vykopané objekty súvisia s rímskym *castellom* Gerulatou (*Šebesta et al. 2017*; *Žák Matyasowszky et al. 2015*). *Castell* bol osídlený od konca 1. stor. do 4. stor. n. l., avšak väčšina nálezov odkrytých počas záchranných výkopov v rokoch 2014–2016 patrí do 2. a 3. stor. n. l. V bezprostrednom okolí Gerulaty sa nachádzala civilná osada a početné pohrebiská z rímskeho obdobia (*Schmidtová 2012*; *Varsik 2012a*).

Prvá hracia doska (1) bola vyrytá na *tegulu* (obr. 3: 2), na druhej dlaždici (2) sa rovnako nachádza vyrytá mriežka, hoci je pravdepodobné, že v tomto prípade skôr súvisí s použitím dlaždice pri stavbe (obr. 3: 1). Hracia doska 1 bola v minulosti publikovaná v katalógu výstavy *Rimania a Slovensko* (*Kucharík ed. 2021*, 181), nebola však podrobená detailnej analýze. Predmet má približne lichobežníkový tvar, rozmery 13 × 12 × 16 × 7 cm, hrúbka sa pohybuje od 2,2 do 2,7 cm. Bol vypálený do oranžovej farby. Jedna strana bola vyhladená, zatiaľ čo na opačnej strane sú viditeľné odtlačky rastlín. Na základe tvaru a zloženia sa predmet javí ako fragment rímskej tehly alebo *teguly*. Do vyhladeného povrchu bola po vypálení plytko vrezaná hracia plocha. Hracia doska pozostáva z mriežky s rozmermi najmenej 7 × 8 štvorcov – čiastočne sa zachovalo 44 štvorcov. Zdá sa, že hracia doska 1 bola vyrytá až po vypálení. Približne v jej strede je viditeľná chybne nakreslená čiara. Plytkosť zárezov naznačuje, že čiary mali byť viditeľné, ale neplnili konštrukčnú funkciu.

Možná hracia doska 2 je podlhovastá a nepravidelná, s rozmermi približne 11,4 × 5,8 cm a hrúbkou od 2,3 do 3,2 cm. Bola vypálená do oranžovej farby. Na jednej jej strane je veľmi tenká (1–2 mm) sivobiela vrstva, pravdepodobne omietka, do ktorej boli vrezané pravidelné štvorcové tvary. Zdá sa, že ryhy vznikli pred vypálením a sú viditeľne hlbšie a širšie ako na hracej doske 1. Zatiaľ čo niekoľko hracích dosiek mriežkového typu z Británie má políčka tejto veľkosti, väčšina z nich je menšia (*Courts/Penn 2021*, 2, 3, obr. 4). Skutočnosť, že zárezy boli urobené pred vypálením, spolu s ich hĺbkou a veľkosťou políčok naznačuje, že tento predmet bol pravdepodobne vyrobený ako stavebná dlaždica. To síce nevylučuje možnosť, že bol neskôr opätovne použitý ako hracia doska, ale takáto interpretácia zostáva do značnej miery hypotetická.

Z Rusoviec poznáme ďalšie nálezy, ktoré súvisia s hrami. Z pohrebiska II z doby rímskej pochádzajú kostené hracie kocky (druhá polovica 1. stor. až koniec 2. stor. n. l.; *Pichlerová 1981*, 19, 76, 148, tab. XXXV: 1, 2; CXXI: 11). Kostená kocka sa našla aj na Kováčovej ulici, v kontexte datovanom do 2.–3. stor. n. l. (*Schmidtová 2012*, 262, obr. 432). Okrem kociek boli zaznamenané aj kostené, sľudové a bronzové žetóny, ktoré sú však bez kontextu (*Schmidtová 2012*, 262, obr. 430).

Hracie dosky mriežkového typu (typ SG podľa *Bell/Roueche 2007*, 108; typ 29 podľa *Pace/Penn/Courts 2024*, 363) sú známou súčasťou ludickej kultúry Rímskej ríše. Nedávna syntéza ukázala, že sú doložené od Británie na západe až po Egypt na východe (*Crist et al. 2024*, 67, obr. 4). V niektorých oblastiach sú hracie dosky mriežkového typu obzvlášť obľúbené: tvoria prevažnú väčšinu takýchto predmetov identifikovaných v Británii (*Courts/Penn 2019*), ale zrejme sú menej časté v lokalitách východného Stredomoria.

Predchádzajúce vedecké práce už skôr spájali hracie dosky mriežkového typu rôznych veľkostí s hrou opísanou v latinskej literatúre v *ludus latrunculorum* alebo *ludus latrunculi* („hra malých vojakov" alebo „hra banditov"; pozri napr. *Austine 1934*, 26; *Bell 1979*, 84–87; *Courts/Penn 2019*, 5–7; *2021*, 1–3; *Murray 1952*, 33, 34; *Parlett 1999*, 234–238; *Purcell 1995*, 5; *Richmond 1994*; *Schädler 1994*; *2001*). Hru môžeme pravdepodobne, vzhľadom na nálezy a zmienky v písomných prameňoch, spojiť s vojenskými spoločenstvami. Je však možné, že niektoré z nálezov hracích dosiek sa používali aj na iné, v súčasnosti neidentifikované hry. Tiež sa predpokladá, že niektoré mriežkovité dosky mohli byť použité aj ako *abakus* (*Eckardt 2017*, 201, s ďalšími odkazmi).

Z územia Slovenska poznáme viacero lokalít z doby rímskej, kde sa podarilo nájsť kocky, hracie kamene/toke-

ny alebo hracie dosky (obr. 4). Najznámejšia hracia doska z dreva sa našla v hrobe príslušníka germánskej elity z konca 4. stor. v Poprade (*Lau/Pieta 2014*, 360, 361; *Lau/Pieta/Štolcová 2022*; *Schädler/Hall 2024*, 162).

Hracie dosky vyryté na rímskej *tegule* poznáme z územia Slovenska z dvoch lokalít – z Iže (*Kolón 2024*) a z lokality Cífer-Pác (*Varsik/Kolník 2021*, 114–119, 220, obr. 169: 4; tabela 6). V oblasti *Carnunta* poznáme ďalšie tri nálezy hracích dosiek vyrytých na tehlách/*tegulách* alebo na kameni (*Beutler et al. Hrsg. 2017*, 354, 355, obr. 716; *Hummer Hrsg. 2009*, 158, obr. 591; 592). Okrem toho sa v Carnuntume našlo ešte päť ďalších nepublikovaných hracích dosiek mriežkového typu (pozri vyššie).

Na území Panónie bolo publikovaných len málo hracích dosiek, hoci dôležitá nedávna práca *L. Dobosi* (*2025*) identifikovala hracie dosky mriežkového typu podobných hracej doske 1 z Rusoviec na týchto lokalitách (alebo v ich blízkosti) z doby rímskej: Arrabona (Győr), Aquincum, Brigetio, Intercisa (dnešný Dunaújváros), Sárvár, a Szabadbattyán. Z lokality na Dunaji v Dunakeszi (Maďarsko) pochádza ďalšia *tegula* s mriežkou (*Mráv 2011*, 47, obr. 52: 5).

Nález hracej dosky z lokality Rusovce nám pomôže pochopiť život na hraniciach Rímskeho impéria. Zároveň veríme, že naša analýza upriami pozornosť výskumu na ďalšie podobné nálezy z územia severu Karpatskej kotliny, ktorých identifikáciu v budúcnosti predpokladáme.

Obr. 1. Bratislava-Rusovce (Gerulata), Maďarská ulica, územie Slovenska. Lokalizácia nálezu hracej dosky.

Obr. 2. Plán stavby/výskumu a miesta vyzdvihnutia nálezov herných dosiek. Legenda: a – hracia doska; b – ryha; c – prvá stavebná etapa kastela (1.–2. stor.); d – tretia stavebná etapa kastela (koniec 3.–4. stor.); e – číslo objektu.

Obr. 3. Bratislava-Rusovce. Doskové hry. 1 – nález č. 2/otázna dosková hra; 2 – nález č. 1/dosková hra. Kresba A. Balogová, foto Š. Hritz.

Obr. 4. Nálezy súčastí hier/herných súčastí na území Slovenska. 1 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Maďarská ulica; 2 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Pohrebisko II; 3 – Bratislava-Rusovce, Kovácsova ulica; 4 – Bratislava-Rusovce, bez kontextu; 5 – Vyšný Kubín; 6 – Iža-Leányvár; 7 – Cífer-Pác; 8 – Bratislava-Devín; 9 – Komárom-Brigetio; 10 – Poprad- Matejovce; 11 – Kostolná pri Dunaji; 12 – Cejkov; 13 – Dunajská Lužná; 14 – Čierny Brod; 15 – Branč; 16 – Krakovany-Stráže; 17 – Veľký Meder; 18 – Kežmarok-Vrbov. Legenda: a – hracia doska; b – kocky; c – tokeny/žetóny; d – ostatné; e – hranica Rímskej ríše.

Manuscript accepted 16. 9. 2025

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